Joseph Famerée and Gilles Routhier, Yves Congar

Joseph Famerée and Gilles Routhier, *Yves Congar* (Paris: Cerf, 2008), 311 pp. €28. ISBN 978-2-204-08566-3 (pbk).

Yves Congar began making ecumenical contacts at an early age. In 1914 when he was ten, his family's church in the Ardennes was firebombed by German troops. So that the congregation could continue worshipping, they were granted use of a nearby Protestant chapel. Congar's ecumenical approach to ecclesiology, whether historical or doctrinal, is communicated clearly in this informative overview of his life and thought. In French and published in the «Initiations aux théologiens» series, it is a collaboration by acknowledged experts on Congar's ecclesiology in the period before the Second Vatican Council (Famerée), and in relation to conciliar reception in the later 1960s and beyond (Routhier).

Congar's ecclesiology was shaped by deep concern for the world and by contact with secular life. His entry into the Dominican novitiate in 1925 followed military service. From 1926 to 1931 he studied at the Saulchoir, which was then in exile near Tournai in Belgium as a result of the French Third Republic's anticlerical legislation. Despite childhood anticipations, Congar dated his ecumenical vocation from this period, with his preparation for ordination including a thesis on Church unity. During the Second World War he served as a chaplain and spent much of the war in captivity. Following various escape attempts he was imprisoned at Colditz and Lübeck, where he continued to minister to fellow inmates.

Famerée and Routhier clarify two possible misconceptions about Congar's theology, and in so doing present significant material for further constructive reflection. First is the context of his theology of the laity. Although Congar is well-known for this, the authors show that his theology of ministry is equally important. Congar initially embraced the hierarchical conception of ministry standard for his generation, seeing the laity as part of the Church's life but not part of its structure. But in his untranslated *Vrai et fausse réforme dans l'Église* (1950)

he began to develop a more dynamic model in which the initiatives of the peripheral lay community receive the blessing of the hierarchic ministerial centre in a relationship of ongoing creative exchange. This view evolved further in *Lay People in the Church* (1953; trans. 1957), in which the laity's priesthood and apostolicity were identified more positively. Some readers might nonetheless consider that this recognition of the mutuality of ordained and lay ministry remains insufficient, although the subtleties of these relationships are rightly the topic of ongoing ecclesial reflection.

The second suggestive area the book examines is ecclesiology and doctrine. Sometimes characterised as promoting a 'Church of the Spirit', Congar in fact depended on a fairly classic Christological ecclesiology, which he progressively filled out with pneumatology. Admittedly, in his *Mystery of the Church* (1941; trans. 1959) he argued that the Holy Spirit, rather than being a passive communicative power of the Father and the Son, operates freely in sometimes unpredictable ways, through ordained ministers but also independently of them. But charismatic activity must be subject to the apostolic rule of faith, which is why a ministerial hierarchy is necessary. Moreover, despite recognizing the Spirit's autonomy, Congar in his classic trilogy *I Believe in the Holy Spirit* discussed how the Spirit is not strictly a third person but is revealed and known primarily by its work in humans, and is the soul of the sacraments. In his late work *The Word and the Spirit* (1984), Congar developed more fully the doctrine that the Church is the co-institution of Christ and the Spirit, with the Spirit actualizing the work of Christ. All ministers therefore need spiritual charism. In discussions such as this, practical questions of ministry are related intimately to classic doctrinal themes.

Core topics addressed at the Second Vatican Council are clearly evident here. Despite his official status as a *peritus* at the Council, Congar had little active involvement in its first phase. This changed completely in Spring 1963, when he became a key member of the team undertaking the Council's 'second preparation', sitting on several commissions and helping to

edit key documents including *Dei Verbum*, *Lumen gentuim* and *Gaudium et spes*. Sensitive to tradition and collegiality, Congar urged moderation in the face of demands from the more radical German *periti* (Küng, Rahner and Ratzinger) that the schemas of the preparatory theological commission be replaced.

This reader is struck by Congar's extraordinarily deep belief in the Church – its history, doctrine, ministry, life, renewal and unity. For Congar, the last of these was a response to the spread of unbelief through postwar Europe. He regarded the unity of Church and society as like a great sacrament, and therefore as a sign and consequence of grace. Yet despite seeing the Church as the place where God is most active – even after measures taken against him in the 1950s, which pierced his soul – Congar was willing to express more direct criticisms of the Church than, for instance, Henri de Lubac. He saw the cultivation of greater eschatological sensibility in the Church as vital to its reform, which he frequently described as the replacement of an ecclesiology of repetition by an ecclesiology of actualization. It was Congar's love of Christ as found in the Church that led him to such passionate, untiring and comprehensive engagement with ecclesiology. Although this 'total ecclesiology' usually overlooks the work of Christ and the Spirit outside Church boundaries and in non-theological disciplines, it is not in itself harmful if kept in perspective and suitably complemented.

Ecumenically, Congar's understanding of catholicity as a capacity for unity or (later) communion, coupled with a progressively greater emphasis on diversity and even plurality as functions of unity, has much to commend it. His own work, comprising doctrinal and historical strands in order to promote the mutual re-reception of different ecclesial traditions, is a model of how scholarly research might assist ecumenical engagement. He covered a gamut of topics, including women's ministry (as early as 1931), and in 1974 women deacons. For reasons of nationality, Lutherans rather than Anglicans were his primary interlocutors, though he admired each of these traditions for their nurturing of religious experience, which

he recognized to be less developed within his own Church. In general, the broad notion of ecclesial tradition that Congar unfolds – not just the apostolic succession of ordained clergy, but the accumulated life and action of the whole Church – has much to commend it ecumenically and awaits a full study. Congar regarded this tradition as a means and original mode of communication, and as a source of revelation − not simply a second-order interpretation of scripture or Church documents.

Curiously, this book will fill more of a gap in the French market, where an accessible introduction to Congar's thought has until now been lacking, than in the English. It might well inspire the English reader to consult studies with a slightly more critical slant, such as Gabriel Flynn's *Yves Congar's Vision of the Church in a World of Unbelief* (Ashgate, 2004) or Douglas Koskela's *Ecclesiality and Ecumenism: Yves Congar and the Road to Unity* (Marquette, 2008), which pursue the themes for constructive reflection that I have identified in this review.

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